

0. Introduction

This paper explores compliment response behaviour among Syrians. The analysis will focus on Syrians' compliment response behaviours while exploring how the power variant affects this behaviour. Analysing the attitudes towards compliments is essential because these attitudes serve more functions than are apparent. When we study compliment responses, it might first give us empirical evidence that supports or refutes politeness theories. Second, it could reveal the differences and similarities between different cultures. Additionally, research done on speech acts for Arab speakers in general, and Syrian speakers in particular, is scarce and in need of further investigation.

Firstly, the reasons for choosing compliment responses are that while a large body of research was conducted on compliments, compliment responses received less attention. However, research shows that compliment responses are more complicated than they seem on the surface. Compliments require a response that is either an agreement or a rejection of the compliment, and both answers carry the risk of being probably impolite (Leech, 2014: 189). Additionally, compliments have this in-betweenness and are subject to multiple constraint systems, and evidence from compliment responses shows what Pomerantz calls 'problematic behaviour' (Pomerantz, 1978: 80).

Therefore, this raises the question of how people deal with this problematic issue, specifically how people respond differently to compliments. Jucker (2009) provides an overview of this issue by listing different taxonomies developed by researchers over time (Pomerantz 1978, Herbert 1989, and Holmes 1988). According to Pomerantz (1978), the two sets of actions that are relevant when we consider responses to compliments are acceptance/rejection and agreement/disagreement. Herbert (1989) later developed a similar taxonomy but took an approach that accounts for the frequency of each type of response. His taxonomy classifies the strategies into two main sections: agreements and non-agreements. Holmes (1988) set up her taxonomy by dividing the strategies into three types: Accept, Reject, and Deflect/Evade. Nelson et al. (1996) conducted a study comparing Syrian and American responses to compliments, and their data set suggested a classification scheme similar to those mentioned earlier, yet was more subtle. Their classification scheme included three broad categories (i.e. acceptances, mitigations, and rejections) and subcategories. This study adapts their design and the subcategories are provided in the Results section in Table 2.

Holmes (1988) proposes a definition for a compliment as being “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker; usually, the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (Holmes, 1988: 446). The definition points towards the importance of the aspect that is positively valued or the topic of the compliment.

Herbert (1998) mentions that the content of compliments “tends to be drawn from a limited stock of concerns, for example, personal appearance (especially clothing and attire), (new) possessions, and the results of skill or effort” (Herbert, 1998: 202). Katsuta (2012) reported a relationship between the topic of the compliment and the variations in compliment response ratios. His study demonstrates that taking the factor of topic is necessary to account for these variations, which are unavoidable in studies that do not account for the topic variable.

Another relevant factor to the variations in compliment responses is the relative power gap between the complimenter and the compliment receiver. The relevance of the power variable is referred to in Brown Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory, where they discuss three factors, which are relative power (P) of H over S, the social distance (D) between S and H, and the ranking of the imposition (R). These sociological variables evaluate the seriousness of a face-threatening act (FTA). According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 74-76), these factors are relevant for many and perhaps all cultures. P, D, and R variables are not the same as a sociologist’s assessment of actual power but only the interlocutors’ perceptions of such ratings. As a result, computing these variables is complex and is definitely culture-specific.

Leech (1983) also discusses power and solidarity in terms of a scale, which can be used to measure politeness. Leech (2014) emphasises this again and mentions the cost-benefit scale corresponding to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) P, D, and R factors, where the ‘cost’ and ‘benefit’ are interpreted in terms of goals. Lorenzo-Dus (2001) considered this aspect when designing their Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to study compliment responses. One of the struggles is the difficulty in differentiating P and D factors since there is no direct way to distinguish the two. However, they mention that the wording and register can be used to interpret the D variable uniformly between participants. Similarly, the R variable is controlled by presenting the participants with identical topics and wording of the compliments. This study adopts their DCT with the necessary modifications to fit the participants’ background and the Syrian cultural context.

The second reason for choosing compliment responses was the culturally specific nature of compliments and compliment responses and how they are conditioned by society. While studies on compliment responses focused on English. Therefore, this study attempts to

bridge this gap in the literature by examining Syrian Arabic speakers' responses to compliments. I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the strategies that Syrians use to respond to compliments?
2. How are these strategies affected by the power variable?
3. How are these strategies affected by the topic of the compliment variable?

This paper is organised as follows: Section 1 starts by introducing how politeness theories treat compliment responses, specifically in the politeness theory proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987), the Politeness Principle by Leech (1983), and Pomerantz's framework (1975). Section 2 explores the relevant research done on compliment responses cross-culturally, then among Arab speakers, and one study with a special focus on speakers of Syrian Arabic (Nelson et al., 1996). Section 3 introduces the research and the methodology. Finally, in the fourth section, I will introduce the results of my analysis and the implications and inferences that could be drawn about Syrians' complimenting behaviours.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Politeness theories

The literature on pragmatics places significant attention on speech formulae and conversational and interactional routines. Politeness theories try to examine the nature of these exchanges to analyse all the strategies that interlocutors employ in their interactions. In general, politeness theories seem to agree that politeness is a strategic conflict avoidance.

1.2. Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson (1987) discuss the notion of face that can be maintained, lost, threatened, or enhanced, and people "cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation in maintaining face in interaction" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory was initially published in 1978. Their publication included two parts, one regarding the theoretical part of the theory in which they described how politeness functions in interactions and the nature of politeness—the second covered politeness strategies with evidence from three languages: English, Tzeltal, and Tamil.

Their study described 'politeness' and set the parameters for their 'Politeness Theory'. Their book describes the phenomenon in which people use different utterances for a purpose, which is politeness. Brown and Levinson introduce the notion of 'face', where they

demonstrate politeness strategies. Mainly, interlocutors operate in a way that allows them to maintain two types of 'face': positive and negative. They classify compliments as predicating "some desire of S toward H or H's goods, giving H reason to think that he may have to take action to protect the object of S's desire, or give it to S" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 66).

1.3. Leech's (1987) Politeness Principle

Another politeness model, Leech's Politeness Principle (PP), was formulated in 1983. Leech (1983) formulated his PP, which has six maxims with their submaxims. The six maxims are Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. Leech's PP has two forms: negative and positive. In its negative form, it is concerned with minimizing impoliteness, while its positive form is concerned with maximizing politeness.

Leech (2014) states that since compliments come in the form of a statement, one would think it would be easy to distinguish between statements that agree with them and those that disagree. Yet compliment responses seem to be more complicated than that since they put the compliment recipient in a double bind: one to agree, violating the Maxim of Modesty, and another to disagree, violating the Maxim of Agreement. This seems to be a strategic conflict that politeness theories should account for.

1.4. Pomerantz's (1978) Constraint System

Pomerantz (1978) focuses on compliment responses in an attempt to account for the 'problematic' chain actions that occur with compliment-compliment response sequences by using conversation analysis to account for compliment responses among native speakers in the United States. Her analysis demonstrates how compliment responses are sensitive to two contradicting constraint systems, namely a supportive one in which the compliment receiver agrees or affirms and another geared towards avoiding self-praise. Pomerantz states that compliment responses could be seen as solution types to this dilemma (Pomerantz, 1978: 92). However, many have challenged politeness theories on the basis of their ethnocentricity. Although Leech (1983) accounts for that by stating that "no claim has been made that the CP applies in an identical manner to all societies" (Leech, 1983:80), yet, most research on speech acts focused on English and its variants. As a result, the current state of speech act research in societies other than English shows that it is receiving little attention, and to a much lesser extent, so is the research on compliment responses.

1.5. More recent frameworks for politeness

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, despite its contribution to a formal theory of politeness, has been challenged by recent research on politeness. Thus, further revisions are necessary to address those challenges. Locher & Watts (2005) proposed a new approach called 'relational work' rather than 'facework' because actions mitigating face-threatening do not seem to limit our interactional cooperative communications. They state that politeness is a term subject to our perspective and suggest that the aim of relational work is to capture not only polite behaviour, but all sorts of behaviour, including impolite and political behaviour involved in our communications.

This discursive approach or 'preception-based' approach differs from older traditional conceptualisations of politeness, which are 'production-based'. Haugh (2007) reports that while these discursive approaches to politeness represent one of the biggest challenges to traditional politeness theories, they still raise a number of epistemological and ontological issues. For example, the issue of reviewing the distinction between first-order politeness (lay perceptions and conceptualisations of politeness) and second-order politeness (theoretical notions of politeness). A second issue is the lack of a clear methodology on how analysts can access such perceptions and assessments of politeness.

Leech (2014) acknowledged those challenges to politeness theories and proposed a modified analysis, including a pragmalinguistic view previously neglected in favour of a sociopragmatic view of politeness. The novel theory takes into consideration more recent approaches and proposes examples of modern-day English speech acts that are associated with politeness or impoliteness. Leech restates the treatment of politeness in principles of pragmatics, and reformulates the maxims of politeness by introducing a single super concern he called "General Strategy of Politeness (or GSP): In order to be polite, S expresses or implies meanings that associate a favourable value with what pertains to O or associates an unfavorable value with what pertains to S (S = self, speaker)" (Leech, 2014:90). By doing that, Leech attempts to rethink his maxims, which, as he described, can be misconstrued.

The current study relies on older versions of the politeness theories, considering the vast gap in the research on the present topic, it seems fit to start analysing the cultural and social aspects of politeness for Syrians against the older models for politeness, mainly since they are concerned with theoretical notions of politeness and they focus on the production of politeness, which is the main concern in this study. It is left for future research to make comparisons

against more recent politeness theories and use the current results as a baseline to clarify the differences and evaluate the evidence to support or refute newer versions of politeness theories.

2. Previous work on compliment responses:

2.1. Cross-cultural studies on compliment responses

Rong Chen (1993) conducted a study to compare compliment responses between two groups: one with Chinese participants and another with American participants. The study aimed to unveil how the two cultures might have different social values and contrast the results against already existing politeness theories such as Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) and Gu's Politeness Principle (1992). The study concluded that, when it comes to different social values between the two cultures, Americans were more likely to accept compliments, and perceived such responses as polite. The Chinese, on the other hand, prioritise appearing modest but not "necessarily... think humbly of themselves" (Chen, 1993: 67). Moreover, when it comes to evaluating how existing politeness theories explain the results, they conclude that Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory does not provide a complete framework to explain the strategies. Also, while Gu's politeness model explained the results well, it still did not perform well in accounting for the American data.

Lorenzo-Dus (2001) explored whether gender has an effect on compliment responses and compared compliment responses by native speakers of British English to native speakers of Spanish using a DCT. The aim was to highlight some of the similarities and differences in strategies used by the two cultures as well as the two genders. Their scenario design took into consideration the power differential between the complimenter and the compliment receiver, namely they used an equal number of situations where the complimenter was in a superior power position relevant to the compliment receiver, the complimenter was in a lower power position, and where there was a power symmetry between the two. Lorenzo-Dus was able to pinpoint some specific strategies, such as fishing for more compliments, the use of humour and irony, and questioning the hidden agenda behind the compliment

2.2 Studies on compliment responses with a focus on Arabic

The work of Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001) helped provide a preliminary analysis of the phenomenon of compliment responses among Jordanian college students. 268 Jordanian college students participated in the study that collected naturally occurring compliment

responses and utilised the collected data to highlight the semantic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic features in Jordanian Arabic. The study demonstrated the importance of the face concept in communication, and the role that compliment responses play in performing this function.

In their studies of compliment responses in the UAE, Rabab'ah et al. (2024) explored the strategies that Emirati Arabic speakers use to respond to compliments, and the effect of gender and degree of formality on their responses. The study used a DCT consisting of 10 scenarios to elicit compliment responses. The results show that the most used strategy is acceptance, and the most used sub-strategies are compliment returns and expressing gratitude. The writers also discussed the idea that the cultural and social context affects speech acts in Arabic and thus is a reason for interpreting the results within the Arab-specific socio-cultural environment.

Nelson et al. (1996) compare compliment responses between Syrian and American speakers. The study focused on the strategies used to respond to compliments and the frequency of each strategy. Of the Syrian compliment responses, 67% were acceptances, 33% were mitigations, and none of the participants resorted to rejections as a response. The results showed that acceptances were the most common strategy among the two cultural groups. Still, while Americans were more likely to use appreciation tokens, Syrians tended to use a unique formula plus acceptance, which was absent in the American data. This study is relevant since it focuses on Syrian Arabic, making it one of the few studies directly aligning with the current research. Given the scarcity of studies explicitly examining Syrian Arabic, the findings and classification scheme presented by Nelson et al. 's (1996) study provides a good framework that can be directly applied to the analysis of the data in this study. It also constitutes a reference point against which the results of this study can be compared with the aim of identifying similarities and/or differences.

3. The current study

3.1 Methodology

A 12-item DCT task was conducted with 64 native speakers of Syrian Arabic (45% males and 55% females), all 20 – 30 years old, from academic backgrounds (university students, graduates, or enrolled in post-graduate programs).

The data was collected using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). A disadvantage of applying this method is that it might not be able to capture the spontaneity of compliment responses; according to Kasper (2008), DCT tasks capture intuitional data but not actual use or behaviour. Similarly, Yuan (2001) documented that the DCT responses are longer because respondents only have one turn to say everything.

However, this method is useful because it allows us to control for the variables and elicit a large sample of data (Jucker, 2009). Additionally, according to Jucker (2009), the DCT task collects stereotypical responses, which will be beneficial for cross-cultural studies.

It is worth mentioning that in the current study, the participants positively interacted with the tasks by providing more information on their emotional state. For example, participants expressed emotional states such as *“I’ll feel happy, and it will give me the motive to be up to the responsibility or it will make me very happy”*, provided an explanation for their responses using statements such as *“You can have it (I don’t want her to take it but it is what I would say as a form of flattery)”*, or extra actions they might take to help analyse their response such as *“I’ll consider taking it off and giving it to her as a present..., I’ll take out the perfume bottle and offer him to try it”*.

The DCT was made in two versions: one for males and one for females. To avoid the cross-gender factor, the compliments would come from complimenters of the same gender. The scenarios were worded according to gender, so every compliment was given by a person of the same gender.

The compliments in the questionnaire were controlled for the compliment topic factor. Four topics were involved: possessions, skills, looks, and personality. The scenarios were carefully chosen to be easily identifiable and familiar to the participants and their social and age groups. Scenarios took place within a university, a class, or friends’ settings. Work-environment scenarios were, for the most part, avoided to prevent speculations in a non-familiar setting (for most participants), except for one scenario where they had to imagine being a manager, a situation that might be unfamiliar for the participant but still able to yield realistic responses since it is a familiar position and a culturally universal role.

The DCT was controlled for the effect of the power variable. Power dynamics were operationalised based on Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework, where P is the Relative Power between H and S, D is the Social Distance between H and S, and R is the Ranking of Imposition. The complimenter was either in a higher, equal, or lower position in relation to the compliment receiver. It is not about the sociologist's ranking of power, but about the interlocutors' assumptions of such ratings (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

I initially adapted Lorenzo-Dus's (2001) design for the DCT task, then modified it to fit the study's variables and goals. Instead of 9 scenarios that only control for power, I carefully constructed 12 scenarios that control for both compliment topic and power relations. The power relation variable has three levels: the complimenter is either in a higher power position relative to the compliment receiver, in a lower power position, or at an equal power position. The topic variable has four levels: looks, possessions, skills, and personality. Table 1. shows the variables and their levels. I replaced the items related to a workplace (for the reasons mentioned) and the details that might not be relevant to the Syrian population (dinner party, tennis game, etc.). Finally, six filler scenarios (S2, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16) were added from other speech acts (apologies, lying, thanking). Table 2. provides a summary of the scenarios and their content.

	Higher Power Position □	Equal Power ⇔	Lower Power Position □
Looks			
Positions			
Skills			
Personality			
Table 1. Power relations and Topic variables			

	Compliment Content	Power Variable
Possessions	S17 (Smart Watch)	□
	S15 (TV screen)	⇔
	S03 (Car color)	□
Skills	S12 (Programming knowledge)	□
	S08 (Essay)	⇔
	S04 (Cooking)	□
Looks	S09 (Elegant look)	□
	S01 (Haircut)	⇔
	S14 (Perfume)	□

Personality	S06 (Commitment and Persistence)	☐
	S11 (Book fair)	☒
	S18 (Instruction style)	☐

Table 2. Scenario summary and content. ☒: complimenter is in a higher power position. ☐ Complimenter is in a lower power position. ☒ Complimenter and compliment receiver are equal in power.

4. Results

4.1. Frequency of individual compliment responses

Analysing the data quantitatively provided some interesting insights into the research questions. To answer the study's first question regarding the strategies used by Syrian native speaker to respond to compliments, Table 3. below provides a detailed breakdown of the frequency and distribution of compliment response strategies employed by the participants. Out of a total of 768 responses, 568 were acceptances (73.96%). Acceptance is the most used strategy, and this high rate of acceptance reflects the Syrian attitude toward maintaining interpersonal harmony and face. Mitigations came second with 177 responses (23.05%), and their "in-between" nature is used as a solution to a conflict between maintaining solidarity and remaining modest. 22 responses were recorded as rejections (2.86%). Rejections were not so frequent, similar to Nelson et al.'s (1996) findings, where no rejections were recorded. However, the current study found some instances of rejections, which, in addition to revealing some culture-specific traits, also reflect Syrians' awareness of the need to appear modest.

Only one utterance was recorded for using a no-response strategy (0.13%). The participant stated that his response was "silence" in the scenario where a person in a lower power position complimented a possession of the compliment receiver. This type of answer is not frequent; however, it could be interpreted as an attempt to minimise the expression of disagreement or minimise the antipathy between interlocutors (Leech, 1983) (Since one party has a car the other party might not be able to get right now).

The most frequent sub-strategy is Acceptance + Formula, in which the compliment receiver accepts the compliment but adds a formula that occurs with a frequency of 222 times and a percentage of 28.91% of the total number of strategies used. Nelson et al. (1996) reported that the most common response type in the Syrian sample was Agreement + Formula, found in

40% of the results. The method of classification could account for this difference. In the current study, to count a response as Acceptance + Formula, some other expression or action should be offered. Different formulas were combined with typical thanking expressions. One popular formula was offering additional information on the complimented topic: *"if you have additional questions, let me know"* *"Do you want to see the bottle?"* Also, there is the formula of offering additional help such as *"if you needed anything else, contact me"*, *"If I saw a similar one, I'll let you know"*, *"if you needed more info, contact me"*, or expressing gratitude as in *"I hope I will meet your expectations"*, *"A testimony from you makes me proud!"*, or *"I'll try my best to stay this way"*.

Compliment Return Strategy	Number	Percentage
Accept	568	73.96%
Appreciation Token	177	23.05%
Agreeing Utterance	78	10.16%
Compliment Return	81	10.55%
Acceptance + Formula	222	28.91%
Upgrade praise	10	1.30%
Mitigate	177	23.05%
Qualifying Comment	122	15.89%
Deflecting Comment	36	4.69%
Reassurance or Repetition Request	19	2.47%
Reject	22	2.86%
Rejecting Utterance	22	2.86%
No Response	1	0.13%
	768	100.00%

Table 3. Frequency of use of CR strategies by Syrians.

4.2. Statistical analysis

Table 4 helps us see how those strategies are affected by the power variable, where we can see an association between the variables. The table presents overall results, collapsed for gender. The data in the table suggests that there were statistically significant differences in the total number of strategies used with the different power dynamics when the topic of compliments was on looks or possessions. The value of χ^2 with looks was $\chi^2(4) = 68,11$ with statistical

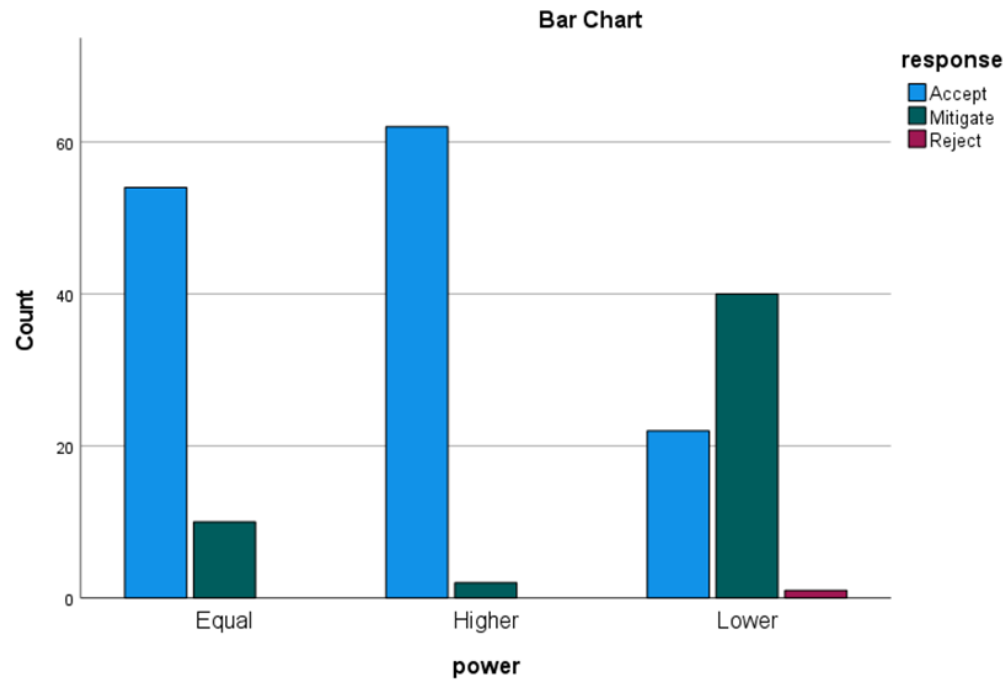
significance ($p < 0.001$). The value of Ch2 with possessions was $\chi^2(4) = 15,81$ with statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

Results

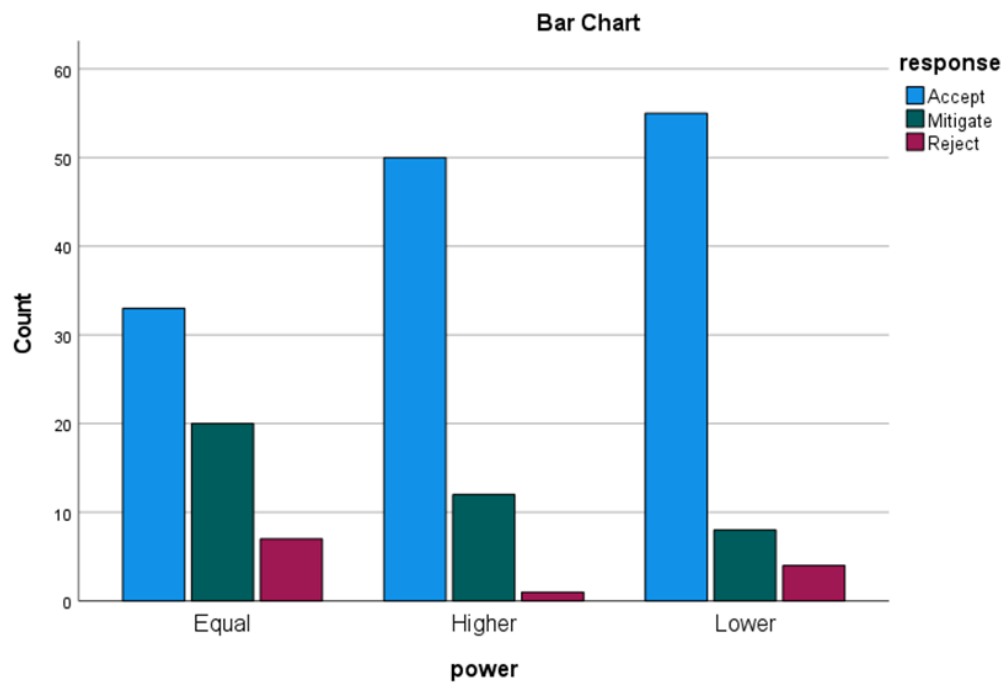
Looks				
	Acceptance	Mitigate	Reject	No response
Equal	$\chi^2(4) = 68,11, p < 0.001$			
Higher				
Lower				
Possessions				
	Acceptance	Mitigate	Reject	No response
Equal	$\chi^2(4) = 15,81, p < 0.05$			
Higher				
Lower				
Skills				
	Acceptance	Mitigate	Reject	No response
Equal	$\chi^2(4) = 4,68, p = 0,321$			
Higher				
Lower				
Personality				
	Acceptance	Mitigate	Reject	No response
Equal	$\chi^2(4) = 4,99, p = 0,288$			
Higher				
Lower				

Table 4. Results of (Ch2) for differences in strategies used according to the power variable and topic variable.

Table 4. Results of (Ch2) for differences in strategies used according to the power variable and topic variable.



Graph 1. Statistical analysis results for the topic ‘looks’



Graph 2. Statistical analysis results for the topic ‘possessions’

4.3. Qualitative Analysis

4.3.1. Power Variable

In order to discuss the power variable, the data was coded and analysed for patterns regarding the power relation between the complimenter and the compliment receiver. Three main trends were noticed; first, the tendency to use rejections with equals. According to Pomerantz (1987), acceptances are an alternative that is preferred (rejections are dispreferred) and acceptance is model behaviour. Acceptance increases solidarity and follows the principle of agreeing with your conversational partner, but it might have some harmful consequences like appearing arrogant because of self-praise or a lousy character assessment or turning into a gossip item, while rejecting the compliment helps in appearing modest and avoiding the dire consequences of self-praise even though it hurts solidarity. The data shows that the usage of rejections was mostly between equals. In this case, the compliment receiver is not afraid of losing solidarity; they can be direct and straightforward. Therefore, because of the equal power relation, prioritising modesty over agreement is available; they can be modest and avoid self-praise.

The second trend is the frequency of using mitigations when the complimenter is in a lower power place. This 'in-between' strategy represents one solution to the contradicting constraints because of its "compromise" feature (Pomerantz, 1978). The responder seems to treat agreement and avoiding self-praise as two ends of a continuum and chooses to appear in the middle (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Agreeing brings solidarity and benefits but might bring negative consequences, such as turning into a gossip item, an unfavourable character assessment, or a complaint (Pomerantz, 1978).

On the other hand, disagreeing will result in losing solidarity on account of trying to be modest. Here, since the compliment receiver is superior in power to H, he is not running the risk of losing the benefits of the agreement. However, they cannot resort to self-praise; a raising of the self may imply a lowering of the other, which would be threatening to their interlocutor's face, considering the power position (Pomerantz, 1978).

The third trend was the frequency of using The Acceptance strategy for compliments received from someone in a higher power position. The highest number of acceptance responses was observed in such situations where it might not bring the harmful consequences that Pomerantz (1987) expects from an agreeing response. The agreement would not bring as much harm since the relative power gap is established; it shows that self-praise is not a power-packed act, and it would not damage solidarity (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

4.3.2. Topic variable

When it comes to topics, the distribution of strategies followed the same general pattern, except for two main trends with possessions and looks.

In general, a significant trend that can be noticed is the high percentage of acceptance with looks. According to Brown and Levinson (1987:66), compliments "predicate some desire of the complimenter toward H or H's good, giving H reason to think that he may have to take action to protect the object of S's desire, or give it to S". The tendency to protect the item might explain the rejections in possessions contrary to acceptance with looks where it seems more profitable to prioritise solidarity.

Possession (Rejections vs. acceptance + formula with lower)

Rejections are mainly noticed with possessions. However, a more specific trend in possessions was the higher frequency of using the sub-strategy acceptance + formula when the compliment was from someone in a lower power position (e.g., the car scenario). Many of the formulas used were about wishing they would get the same car one day. This can be explained by Leech's (1983) Tact maxim, which could be an alternative strategy for offering the object.

Looks (Acceptance with higher + equal vs. mitigation with lower)

When it comes to looks, a noticeable difference was in using the acceptance with people in a higher or equal power position. In comparison, the "qualifying comment" was used with those who are in a lower power position. This could be because, when the complimenter is in a lower power position, self-praise could mean their dispraise, which could be sensitive considering the power dynamic. At the same time, the same risk is not present when the complimenter is on the same level of power or a higher level.

The statistical analysis provided earlier shows an association between the variables in line with the qualitative analysis. The association or significance were found in relation to looks and possessions as topics for the compliment and the qualitative analysis shows that they might have an effect on compliment responses behaviours.

4.4. Cultural trends

4.4.1. Evil eye rejections

The results show a high prevalence of rejections when it comes to possessions. According to Brown & Levinson (1987:66), a compliment "predicates some desire of the complimenter toward H or H's good, giving H reason to think that he may have to take action to protect the object of S's desire, or give it to S". The tendency to protect the item might explain the rejections

in possessions contrary to acceptance with looks. Another aspect of these rejections could be attributed to what Maloney (1976) describes as the belief that you might cause harm to a person simply by praising them since praising them can attract the attention of the evil eye to them. Many of the rejections recorded instances of using protective expressions in an attempt to invite God into the discourse to eliminate the effect of the evil eye. Participants in some instances mentioned the evil eye directly as in “*Be ism Allah men A’inek*”, meaning “*In the name of God I ask for protection from your eye*” or “*Yekhreb Baitek, Hamsa men A’inek*”, which translates into “*May the Hamsa hand protect it from your evil eye*”. The Hamsa hand is a symbol of cultural significance associated with protection from the evil eye. In other instances, participants invited their complimenter to take protective actions or use religious sayings in what seems to be a mutual understanding of the effect of the evil eye on the complimented object (e.g. *Say Mashallah, Knock on wood, etc.*). Cuesta & Yousefian (2015) discussed the idea that despite being face-enhancing acts, compliments could be treated as threatening for their invitation of the evil eye in Islamic societies. They also emphasised the need to use protective expressions when complimenting in Persian and Arabic to avoid those effects (Cuesta & Yousefian, 2015: 138). One popular way is using the Quranic verses specified for envy: “[Say, *“I seek refuge in the Lord of daybreak”*] ...and from the evil of the envier when he envies”. This cultural trend and its occurrence in the data align with Maloney (1976) and Cuesta & Yousefian (2015). This particular cultural trend also demonstrates that politeness in Syrian Arabic goes beyond facework, which in turn has theoretical implications, especially for Brown & Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory, since it cannot account for this type of data. Among other consequences, this also raises the question of the effect of cultural beliefs on politeness.

4.4.2. Praise upgrade

A few instances were observed for using praise upgrades, which were handled as being a special type of the sub-strategy “Agreeing Utterance”. Praise upgrades are a special type of agreement where the compliment receiver not only agrees with the compliment but takes it to a higher level using explicit self-praise, as in, for example, saying “*There is nothing that I can’t do if I put my mind to it!*” “*We’re not the only, but the best*”, “*This is my speciality and will always be!*”.

Lorenzo-Dus (2001) recorded similar instances of that strategy, in which Spanish participants, particularly male respondents, generally opted for ironic/humorous upgrades. Pomerantz (1978) mentions this strategy and describes it as occurring in environments where agreeing is preferred and includes “stronger second evaluation terms” (Pomerantz, 1978: 93).

The strategy could aim to convey that the complimented aspect is not worth the compliment, so it would serve as an alternative to rejecting the compliment. It is also helpful when the participant wants to agree with the compliment, but adding humour would save him from explicit self-praise.

4.4.3. Offering the complimented object

Finally, a prevailing expression used was "Ma'admeh", which means "You can have it! or more literally 'it is presented to you'". It is one of the most popular formulas Syrians use, which conveys their willingness to give up the item for the complimenter. This strategy is used as a pragmatic marker of politeness, which is seen in some of the metapragmatic comments of the participants. In some cases, it was sincere, as in "the first thing that I will think of is taking [the watch] off and giving it to her and offering it as a souvenir from me". Some of the responses showed effort or even desire to be able to give it to the complimenter, for example, "You can have it, professor. I will tell her the story of how I got it and if I had the financial ability, I will ask when her Birthday is and I will tell her that she will have one like it or even better". In other responses, participants explained that they would employ this expression only to meet a social expectation. For example, one of the respondents mentioned "I will say 'ma'admeh' [you can have it] but I will hope he will not actually take it". This strategy is used in scenarios with possessions, and especially with compliments from people in higher status in regard to power "e.g. professor".

Similar results were recorded by Chen (1993), where Chinese participants offered the object, and in cases where the object cannot be offered, they resorted to "the next best thing - offering encouragement to satisfy the complimenter's envy" (Chen, 1993: 58). Some of the respondents in the data behaved similarly to this, especially in a scenario where a possession was complimented. However, since it was a car, it was not plausible to offer it. Respondents, in that case, offered "the next best thing" where they hoped the complimenter would have a car like this in the future. This seemed to be a case of the Tact Maxim, namely, to 'maximise benefit to others' (Leech, 1983). This response strategy seems to have a culture-specific trait, and its prevalence and the different ways of expressing it might carry some interesting insights into the conceptualisations of politeness for Syrians.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study provided an analysis of compliment response strategies by native speakers of Syrian Arabic, and the role of the power relation and topic in using these strategies. A carefully constructed DCT was used to collect responses from speakers of Syrian Arabic, both males and females and all from academic backgrounds. The findings indicate that the most used strategy was acceptance, with Acceptance + Formula being the most used sub-strategy. This aligns with previous research on Syrian Arabic by Nelson et al. (1996). However, in contrast to their study, there is a notable presence of rejection strategies among contemporary Syrian speakers. Using Nelson et al.'s (1996) classification scheme has proven effective in categorising these responses, and was a reference point for comparing results to identify similarities and differences.

The research contributes to the understanding of politeness strategies within Syrian Arabic and how the choice of the strategy can be linked to factors such as power relations and topic. Regarding the power variable, we can see that rejections were mainly used with equals; acceptances were used when the compliments came from someone in a higher power position, and mitigations were the preferred strategy when the compliments came from someone in a lower power position. The topic variable also showed some interesting trends, such as the tendency to use rejections with possessions in contrast to looks, where the preferred strategy was acceptance.

The results could also be viewed from a cultural point of view, as they highlight some specific cultural trends. The effect of the evil eye was highly present when the topic was possessions. Participants were more likely to reject compliments on the grounds that they would attract the evil eye and harm the complimented object. Another cultural-specific trend was offering the complimented object via using the acceptance + formula sub-strategy, where the participants offered the complimented object, which was sincere in some cases, and in others, it was not. The humours praise upgrade was also noticed in the data, similar to Lorenzo-Dus' (2001) findings, where Spanish males tended to use this strategy.

The theoretical implications of the study are discussed within three frameworks: Brown & Levinson (1987), Leech (1983, 2014), and Pomerantz (1978). Brown and Levinson (1987) state that compliments potentially threaten the compliment receiver's face (indebting nature, expressing envy or admiration), which forces them to take actions to protect the object or offer it. However, compliments still have an aspect of attending to and noticing the compliment receiver's interests and needs (positive face needs). The data in our study supports the latter,

stating that compliments are positive politeness strategies to a large extent. This is shown by the prevalence of acceptances among Syrians. However, these points make some predictions about how to respond to compliments (returning compliments or expressing gratitude). However, the other strategies used might not be explained well in light of Brown & Levinson's Politeness Theory (1978). In addition, their theory also fails to account for the effect of culture on politeness. Evil eye rejections found in the data suggest that politeness for Syrians goes beyond facework, a challenge previously faced by their theory.

Pomerantz (1978) states that responses to compliments have a preference system with supportive actions on one end and self-praise avoidance on the other. The responder then can choose to appear in the middle, which can explain the other strategies (qualifying comment, deflecting, and repetition request). Leech's (1983) principle also seems to offer a fitting framework to explain the strategies. The most important maxim seems to be 'the agreement maxim' with its submaxim 'maximise agreement with others' as it can be used to explain 'appreciation token & agreeing utterance' strategies, which are mostly prevailing. Nonetheless, other maxims seem to be important in explaining the other strategies used by Syrians. The tact maxim seems important to explain the 'acceptance + formula' strategy, Approbation maxim explains 'compliment returns', and Modesty maxim explains 'rejections'. For the most part, they are geared toward positive politeness.

It seems that, for Syrians, modesty does more damage to their face than self-praise. Although they are aware of the need to be modest and considerate of power relations, there is a significant tendency toward agreements (and, as a result, toward self-praise). On a spectrum of modesty vs. self-praise, Syrians seem to prefer increasing solidarity over prioritising humbleness and modesty.

The study is not without limitations that prevent the generalisation of the present results. First, the study did not extensively explore cross-gender interactions. Male and female participants were included, but the DCT presented compliments from the same gender. Therefore, cross-gender compliment exchanges remain underexplored. These interactions could provide deeper insights into how gender roles and expectations influence the choice of compliment response strategies. Future research could address this gap by focusing on cross-gender communication in Syrian Arabic to uncover additional cultural and social dynamics. Second, while the data collection methods in this study might reveal stereotypical responses that are beneficial for culture-specific purposes, elicited responses using a DCT may differ from those occurring in natural, spontaneous conversations. Expanding future studies to

include real-time observation or in-depth interviews could reveal more insights into the conclusions drawn from this study.

More insights can be collected from cross-gender studies, but we will leave that as a possibility for future research. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations in generalising the findings of this study to the broader population; since the sample consisted of participants from academic backgrounds, the linguistic and cultural diversity within Syria suggests the need for further research across different regions and social contexts.

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